

1/7/22 Friday

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White House, Western Media Shift Gears as Kazakhstan's Tokayev Gets 'Russian-Backed Strongman' Label
By - Morgan Artyukhina

From Venezuela to Ethiopia, countries targeted for regime change by Washington inevitably see their leaders labeled as "strongmen" backed by "dictators" in Russia or China. The recent deployment of this term for Kazakh President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev as the US declares its innocence in destructive riots is thus a dark sign of times to come.

"There are some crazy Russian claims about the US being behind this," White House spokesperson Jen [Psaki said on Wednesday](#) about the riots in Kazakhstan. "So, let me just use this opportunity to convey that as absolutely false and clearly a part of the standard Russian disinformation playbook we've seen a lot of in past years."

After events in Kazakhstan took a decisive turn on Wednesday, so did western media's orientation toward them. Now, Tokayev has become a "Russian-backed" strongman and the West has found another self-proclaimed opposition leader to drive a wedge into the country's politics.

On January 2, Kazakhstan's western Mangystau region saw several oil-rich towns near the Caspian Sea erupt in demonstrations over a sharp rise in petroleum prices. However, other demonstrations soon erupted in Almaty, the country's eastern metropolis and former capital, which became far more violent. Public buildings were stormed, sacked and torched, and rioters attacked police with weapons, including rifles.

At least 4,000 rioters have been arrested, while thousands have been injured and an unknown number killed. Hundreds of police officers and national guardsmen have also been injured and at least 18 killed, including two who were beheaded. Tokayev said Friday that roughly 20,000 gunmen had attacked Almaty and displayed evidence of foreign training.

Tokayev declared a state of emergency, said the rioters were terrorists with foreign backing, and invoked the mutual defense clause of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). CSTO members Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have all answered the call, sending peacekeeping forces to Kazakhstan to protect public buildings but not engage in law enforcement operations.

Ablyazov Condemns Russian 'Occupation'

Then on Friday, [Reuters interviewed](#) a former Kazakh trade minister and banker who has been hiding out in Paris from charges that he perpetrated one of the biggest financial frauds in history: Mukhtar Ablyazov. In the interview, he claimed to be leader of the opposition to Tokayev and called on the West to "tear Kazakhstan away from Russia."

"If not, then Kazakhstan will turn into Belarus and [Russian President Vladimir] Putin will methodically impose his program - the recreation of a structure like the Soviet Union," Ablyazov

told Reuters. "Russia has already entered, sent in troops. CSTO is Russia. This is an occupation by Russia."

"I see myself as the leader of the opposition," Ablyazov also said. "Every day the protesters call me and ask: 'What should we do? We are standing here: What should we do?'"

"I know the Soviet cliché of a Western spy, but I would be happy to be an American or European spy because then we would live like the people in America or Europe - and everyone would laugh," he said. "Sadly, the West doesn't help me; the West hinders me."

An [article published Friday](#) in the US state-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFERL) Kazakh Service made a telling observation about the protests. One of the demands by protesters from the country's unregistered Democratic Party (not to be confused with Ablyazov's party, Democratic Choice), who claim not to be part of the violent "provocateurs" torching public buildings and shooting at police, was "the immediate deployment of foreign peacekeepers" from the CSTO "to bolster security amid the chaos."

Synchronicity With Western Media, Leaders

However, much of Ablyazov's rhetoric has a mirror in that used by Western media and politicians, including the New York Times and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Speaking Friday in Washington, [Blinken said](#) "it's not clear why they feel the need for any outside assistance," referring to Kazakh security forces, who he said "certainly have the capacity to deal appropriately with protests."

"We're trying to learn more about it," Blinken added. "I think one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave."

The same language appeared in a Friday article in the New York Times, as well. An [opinion piece by Andrew Higgins](#), the Times' Central and Eastern Europe bureau chief, was titled "In Kazakhstan, Putin Again Seizes on Unrest to Try to Expand Influence."

"But a series of revolts against a pro-Russian strongman could also plant the seeds of rebellion at home, analysts say," the article's lede adds.

"The arrival in Kazakhstan of 2,500 troops from a Russian-led military alliance amid continuing spasms of violent protest was the fourth time in just two years that Moscow has flexed its muscle in neighboring states - Belarus, Armenia and Ukraine being the other three - that the West has long tried to woo," Higgins wrote.

"And once Russian troops arrive, they seldom, if ever, go home. Russian troops sent three decades ago as 'peacekeepers' to the breakaway region of Moldova and the Abkhazia region of Georgia are still there."

According to Higgins, Tokayev is one of the "strongman leaders the Kremlin has trusted to keep order," but before Tokayev requested CSTO peacekeepers on Wednesday, he wasn't being referred to as Russian-backed.

Also on Friday, Jonathan Landay, a Reuters national security reporter in Washington, DC, also [referred to Tokayev](#) as "the Russian-backed president."

"Expect to see 'Russian-backed' in every reference to Kazakhstan from now on, just as there are no 'Houthis' but only 'Iran-backed Houthis,'" news analyst Steve Patt said in a Friday tweet in response. "Propaganda never sleeps."

On Thursday, Psaki also questioned the validity of the CSTO deployment, [telling reporters](#) that the Biden administration has "questions about the nature of this request and whether it has - it was a legitimate invitation or not."

Other outlets have perpetuated similar misconceptions, including US National Public Radio, [which said on Friday](#) that “Russian troops are in Kazakhstan to help quell deadly anti-government protests,” and [Axios, which said](#) on Thursday that “Russian paratroopers descended on Kazakhstan’s largest city Thursday to help quell the largest uprising in the history of the former Soviet republic.”

It is important to note, for the record, that the international peacekeeping force is there under CSTO direction and control, not Russian, and the organization’s rotating chair is presently held by Armenia, not Russia. Also, to reiterate the above, the CSTO peacekeepers are only in Kazakhstan to protect public buildings, not to engage in law enforcement operations.

Recycled Regime Change Playbook

This type of message coordination between US leaders, corporate media, and opposition politicians in targeted countries has been seen before on several occasions.

In Venezuela in 2019, when a no-name opposition figure named Juan Guaido arbitrarily and unilaterally declared himself the country’s interim president, despite having almost no following in the country, he got extensive support from the US and other Western powers - to say nothing of [the Western media](#) - and has been upheld by them as Venezuela’s legitimate leader instead of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Maduro has [become a “strongman”](#) kept in power by Russia and Cuba, which have been punished and demonized by the US as a result.

It was seen again in Ethiopia in 2021, when the US supported the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) against Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. When [Abiy successfully resisted](#) the TPLF offensive and pushed the group back into Tigray from other parts of Ethiopia they had occupied, the New York Times [stepped in to portray him](#) as a strongman being kept in power by drones supplied by like-minded [authoritarians in Eritrea](#), Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and China.

The former President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, was also labeled a “strongman” in 2019 [by the country’s opposition](#), who accused him of trying to change the results of the election. Morales, too, was portrayed as an [“authoritarian” propped up](#) by other strongmen, including Maduro.

That this rhetoric has once again surfaced in the context of the riots in Kazakhstan suggests the accusations Psaki cavalierly labeled as “crazy” might not be so crazy after all.

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China Announces New Post of Special Envoy to Horn of Africa as US Assigns New Diplomat to Region

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced on Thursday during a visit to several Horn of Africa nations that the foreign ministry would create a new special liaison to the region, where the US is struggling to maintain its former influence.

Speaking [Thursday in Mombasa](#), Kenya, Wang said the two nations are “partners for peace in the region” and would continue to coordinate at the United Nations Security Council and in other venues to increase that role.

Later, during a meeting with Kenya's Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary, Raychelle Omano, [Wang announced](#) he would appoint a special envoy to the Horn of Africa to further those goals. "I believe that this is what we need," Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta replied. "Kenya-Africa does not need lectures, Kenya-Africa needs friends willing to work with us to achieve our goals and our aspirations."

Wang's visit to Kenya came after a [two-day stop in Eritrea](#), after which the two [foreign ministries declared](#) a new Strategic Partnership, and China reaffirmed its support for Eritrea against [unilateral sanctions](#) imposed by the United States.

"Regional countries know best the problems within the region and it's up to the people of a country to properly handle its internal affairs," Wang said in Asmara. He made similar comments a month prior while in Addis Ababa, where Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government has been sanctioned by Washington for the [same reason as Eritrea](#): fighting an armed uprising by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the former longtime rulers of Ethiopia who had fought a disastrous war against Eritrea while in power.

Wang's visit and announcement of the new envoy also come as the US is [putting heavy pressure](#) on Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmaajo, for having suspended his prime minister, Mohamed Hussein Roble, following accusations Roble had interfered in a corruption probe against himself. The US said Farmaajo was attempting to subvert the democratic process Roble has been overseeing.

In another nearby country, Sudan, the US is hoping to influence an ongoing [mass protest movement](#) against a military regime that enjoys Saudi, Emirati and Israeli support. Across the Red Sea, the US continues to support the Saudi-led war in Yemen that has claimed almost 400,000 lives. The coalition is fighting the rebel Houthis movement, which it claims is a proxy force supported by Iran, although both the Houthis and Iranians reject the claim.

Earlier this week, the US' own special envoy to the Horn, Jeffrey Feldman, resigned after months of failing to either end the war in Ethiopia or [get Abiy removed](#) from power. US Secretary of State Antony [Blinken also announced](#) on Thursday that David Satterfield, the outgoing US ambassador to Turkey, would take Feldman's place in the Horn.

Satterfield has long represented US interests in the Middle East, including as ambassador to Lebanon from 1998 until 2001 and serving several roles under the George W. Bush administration, including Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs, Deputy Chief of Mission with rank of Ambassador in Iraq during the US' occupation war, and as Coordinator for Iraq and Senior Adviser to Secretary of State when Condoleezza Rice headed the department.

He also became Chief of Mission at the US embassy in Cairo in August 2013, after the US-trained Gen. [Abdel Fattah el-Sisi overthrew](#) the country's first democratically elected president and seized power.

International

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Three Sentenced to Life in Prison for Murder of Black Man Ahmaud Arbery

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A judge in the US state of Georgia has sentenced all three men found guilty of killing Ahmaud Arbery to life in prison.

Travis McMichael, 35, and his father Gregory, 66, were both sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole on Friday. Another man, 52-year-old William "Roddie" Bryan, was given life in prison, but with the possibility of parole after 30 years because he cooperated with investigators.

Arbery's parents asked the judge during the hearing to give the trio the strongest sentences possible.

The three men were [found guilty in November](#) of a slew of crimes associated with Arbery's murder in February 2020. Arbery, a 25-year-old Black man, was out for a jog on a public street in the Satilla Shores neighborhood of Brunswick, Georgia, when the trio of men, all white, chased him down after arbitrarily suspecting him of burglary.

In an incident captured on video by Bryan, the three men chased down Arbery in their truck and cut off his route of escape before confronting him with firearms. Arbery was unarmed and attempted to flee from the men before being shot three times by Travis using a shotgun, killing him.

After [video of Arbery's killing](#) went viral on social media in May 2020, it helped fuel the massive Black Lives Matter protests that [swept the United States](#), becoming the largest social uprising the country had seen in half a century, since the civil rights battles of the 1960s.

Speaking before reading the sentence on Friday, Judge Timothy [Walmsley called the killing](#) "a tragedy on many, many levels."

"A young man with dreams was gunned down in this community," the judge said of Arbery. "As we understand it, he left his home, apparently to go for a run, and ended up running for his life." Wanda Cooper-Jones, Arbery's mother, told the judge during her victim impact statement, "they chose to target my son because they didn't want him in their community. When they couldn't sufficiently scare him or intimidate them, they killed him."

Cooper-Jones said raising Arbery was "the honor of my life."

Marcus Arbery, his father, said in his statement that his son loved to run. "That's when he felt most alive, most free, and they took all that from him," he said.

"The man who killed my son has sat in this courtroom every single day next to his father. I'll never that chance ever to sit next to my son ever again," the elder Arbery said. "Not a dinner table, not a holiday and not at a wedding."

Bryan and the McMichaels will also face federal hate crimes charges in a separate trial set to begin next month.

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Saudi Media Ministry Hires Former Producer for US Anchor Katie Couric for PR Campaign

By - Morgan Artyukhina

A former producer for US news anchor Katie Couric has taken a new job with Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Media, according to a disclosure filed with the US Department of Justice. According to the filing made under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) on Monday, Couric's former producer told the DOJ that she had been working for Thiqah Business Services for much of the previous year. The firm is 100% owned by the Saudi government, according to the city marketing portal [Eye of Riyadh](#), which notes it is "owned by Saudi Authority for Accredited Valuers (TAQEEM), and Saudi Organization for Certified Public Accountants (SOCPA)."

She received \$15,000 in retainer payments from the firm in both November and December of 2021, but the filing noted no other information about compensation. A copy of the contract for her freelance services that was included in the filing was dated May 29, 2021.

According to the filing, Nicolla Hewitt "will perform general public relations and media outreach services, including outreach to broadcast, print, and social media about the changing way of life in Saudi Arabia."

The [ministry's website says](#) it "works in an active role by identifying and preserving the Saudi identity, spreading Islamic values in the Saudi citizen's life, expressing the achievements of Saudi Arabia. The Ministry contributes to raise the awareness and roles that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia doing."

The Saudi monarchy has long leaned on Western consulting firms to manage its public relations, especially after launching the catastrophic war against the Yemeni Houthi movement in 2015. In the six months following the outbreak of war, the Saudi embassy in Washington, DC, paid French consulting firm Qorvis Communications \$7 million in PR services, [according to The Intercept](#). It has retained the firm since 2002.

Hewitt worked as a producer for Couric at many of the major US corporate television news outlets over the years, including NBC, CBS, and Yahoo, until 2014, [according to her LinkedIn](#) profile. She also worked at ABC for a time. However, in 2008 she also started her own firm, Nicolla Hewitt Communications.

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CDC Shortens Wait Time to Receive Booster Shot for Moderna Recipients

According to the CDC, an initial booster shot from Moderna should be expected to protect individuals through the winter, but by next fall its efficiency could waver, making a fourth shot of the vaccine necessary.

CDC Director Rochelle Walensky has [signed off on a recommendation](#) from the FDA that those who received the Moderna vaccine are now eligible to get a booster 5 months after their second shot rather than 6.

This new adjustment for the Moderna booster is for those aged 18 and older.

"The country is in the middle of a wave of the highly contagious Omicron variant, which spreads more rapidly than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus and other variants that have emerged." Dr. Peter Marks, the director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research said.

"Vaccination is our best defense against COVID-19, including the circulating variants, and shortening the length of time between completion of a primary series and a booster dose may help reduce waning immunity," he continued. "We encourage everyone to get vaccinated—it's never too late to get your COVID-19 vaccine or booster."

Commonly reported side-effects from those who received a booster dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine include pain, redness and swelling at the injection site, as well as fatigue, headache, muscle or joint pain and chills.

[According to the FDA](#), Pfizer-BioNTech recipients who received their two-dose primary series are also eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine booster after 5 months. At the same time, teens aged 12 to 17 can get a Pfizer booster shot only. For J&J recipients who are ages 18 and older, the wait time to receive a booster shot is only 2 months.

Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel voiced his concern at a health care conference hosted by Goldman Sachs on Thursday, "I would expect that it's not going to hold great. I worry about next fall."

According to the CDC, the new Omicron variant spreads more quickly than the SARS-CoV-2 virus. There are now 500,000 cases of COVID-19 reported a day which is more than any other previous point in the pandemic. Hospitalizations have also increased to more than 50 percent over the last two weeks. Health officials urge those who are eligible to get a COVID-19 vaccine booster to do so, as they attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus which is causing severe illness, hospitalizations, and death.

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Ye & Jared Kushner Cozy up at Casual Dinner in Miami - Photo

West, 44, and Trump's former senior advisor, 40, were seen at the Italian restaurant, Carbone in Miami Beach. According to the rapper, the two discussed books.

Kanye West, who now goes by "Ye", and Jared Kushner were spotted having dinner in Miami Thursday night.

Anyone might expect the two wealthy, high-powered businessmen to be having a power dinner, but a source told Page [Six](#), "It was a purely private dinner, [with no] business agenda."

West, who has his own fashion line, wore a \$995 neon yellow Balenciaga sweatshirt along with a pair of destroyed black jeans, knee-high black Red Wing boots, sunglasses, and one black glove.

After January of last year when former President Trump's term ended, his daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Kushner moved to Miami with their 3 kids where they leased a luxury [condo](#).

Ye has been seen to frequent Carbone on more than one occasion. Ye and Julia Fox, the Italian-American filmmaker and actress, were seen dining at the same location on New Year's Day. But Fox and Ivanka Trump must have been busy, as the two were absent from the dinner on Thursday night.

According to Kushner, he and Kanye West have been friends for longer than a decade.

"Kanye has been a friend for ten years," Kushner told Fox News in 2020. "He's a very very special person. He's a very successful music artist, he's a very successful designer, he's been very successful in a lot of things he has done."

West has been an open supporter of his friend's father-in-law, former President Trump (despite some [controversial comments](#)). Kanye took heat from media outlets, other celebrities, and the public when he wore a MAGA hat on SNL in 2018.

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Trump Slams Dems' Jan 6 Commemorations as 'Phony Event', Compares Biden to 'Insecure Dictators'

In an email sent earlier, the ex-POTUS slammed Democrats for "using his name to try to further divide America," as his political opponents, including President Biden, also used their commemoration speeches to accuse Trump of instigating last year's Capitol riot.

Former President Trump has issued a long-winded statement on Friday, lambasting the "left-wing political and media establishment" for "trying to turn America into a country that our people can barely recognize."

"These radical leftists in Washington care NOTHING for American Democracy. All they care about is control over you, and wealth and riches for themselves," Trump said.

"But for them, the worst part of it all is the knowledge that the American People are seeing right through their phony media event—which despicably compared a Pelosi-led security failure at the Capitol to the darkest days in American history and the deaths of 3,000 Americans. The people see right through that sham. They see a cynical politician who ran for office promising unity who is now doing the most divisive thing possible—slandering his political opponents as domestic terrorists, just like insecure dictators do in communist countries," Trump continued. Trump had canceled a planned news conference that was to be held at his Palm Beach resort, Mar-a-Lago on Thursday, though it was predicted that the former president was planning to share his own views on the events of Jan. 6, 2021. Trump explained that the reason he had canceled the event was, "In light of the total bias and dishonesty" of Democrats, 2 Republicans, and the "fake news media."

President Biden did not refer to the former president directly by name, but did reference him in his speech on [Thursday](#), saying "He's not just a former president. He's a defeated former president — defeated by a margin of over 7 million of your votes."

After denouncing the former president and the events of the Jan. 6 attacks, Biden saw an opportunity in his speech to push for a federal election bill. "We have to be firm, resolute and unyielding in our defense of the right to vote, and to have that vote counted," said Biden. "The ballot prevails, not violence."

In response to the Democrats' "[Freedom to Vote Act](#)", Trump accused Democrats of wanting to amend voter laws because, "they know they will overwhelmingly LOSE any fair and honest election."

While he has not officially announced a bid for the White House, political analysts and media are [predicting](#) former President Trump to make a decision after the November midterms.

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Moderna Expects to Have COVID-19 Booster Targeting Omicron by Fall 2022

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) – Moderna is developing an updated booster vaccine against COVID-19 set to be released in the fall and offer protection against Omicron, CEO Stephane Bancel told CNBC.

"We are discussing with public health leaders around the world to decide what we think is the best strategy for the potential booster for the fall of 2022. We believe it will contain omicron," Bancel said.

The Omicron-specific booster shot will soon enter clinical trials as Moderna prepares to supply as many as 2-3 billion booster doses this year alone, according to the report.

The United Kingdom, South Korea, Switzerland have already placed orders for Moderna boosters worth \$18.5 billion, the report said.

Last week, the US Food and Drug Administration shortened the interval between receiving the initial COVID-19 vaccine doses produced by Moderna and getting a booster shot from six months to five in American adults 18 and older.

Omicron remains the predominant variant of the coronavirus in the United States and accounts for 95.4% of new infections, according to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the week ending January 1.

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Novavax Seeks Emergency Use Authorization of COVID-19 Vaccine in South Africa

WASHINGTON, January 10 (Sputnik) - American biotechnology company Novavax said on Monday that it has filed for emergency use authorization of its COVID-19 vaccine in South Africa.

"Novavax ... and Serum Institute of India Pvt. Ltd. (SII),... today announced a regulatory submission to the South African Health Products Regulatory Agency (SAHPRA) for emergency use authorization (EUA) of Novavax' recombinant nanoparticle protein-based COVID-19 vaccine candidate with Matrix-M adjuvant. If authorized, the vaccine (known as NVX-CoV2373) will be manufactured by and commercialized by SII in South Africa under the brand name Covovax," the statement said.

Novavax President Stanley Erck said the company is thankful for its long history of partnership in South Africa.

"Novavax and Serum Institute remain focused on delivering the COVID-19 vaccine - built on well-understood technology - where it is needed most. We look forward to SAHPRA's review and, if authorized, delivering the vaccine to help South Africa control the pandemic," he said. In December, the World Health Organization recommended Nuvaxovid, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by Novavax, for emergency use. The company says that it has started work on developing the "Omicron-specific construct" of the antigen in its COVID-19 vaccine as part of a two-pronged strategy to curb the spread of the new coronavirus variant.

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Pfizer Omicron Vaccine Will Be Ready in March - CEO

WASHINGTON, January 10 (Sputnik) - Pfizer has started manufacturing a vaccine that specifically targets the Omicron variant of the coronavirus and the doses will be ready in another two months, CEO Albert Bourla told CNBC.

"This vaccine will be ready in March," Bourla said in an interview. "We (are) already starting manufacturing some of these quantities at risk."

The executive noted that Pfizer wasn't sure if an Omicron vaccine was really needed, given the less lethal risk it poses to people compared to some other COVID-19 strains despite its fast transmissibility. But Pfizer was going ahead to produce the vaccine because some governments wanted it as soon as possible.

The vaccine could potentially target other coronavirus variants that are in circulation, he said.

"The hope is that we will achieve something that will have way, way better protection particularly against infections, because the protection against the hospitalizations and the severe disease — it is reasonable right now, with the current vaccines as long as you are having let's say the third dose," Bourla said.

The Omicron emerged as the dominant coronavirus strain in the United States late last year, causing almost all new US infections of the virus. Despite this, the variant has proven to be less lethal than the Delta which caused a resurgence in hospitalizations and deaths last year after a respite from the original COVID-19 strain.

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YEAR IN REVIEW - US-China Ties, Afghanistan, Migrant Crisis Dominate World News in 2021

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik), Ekaterina Chukaeva - The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, the migrant crisis at the Belarus-Poland border and elsewhere, the events at the US Capitol on and after January 6, the in-person summit between the American and Russian presidents and relations between China and the United States were among the main items dominating headlines around the world in 2021.

US CAPITOL RIOT

The year started with the events at the US Capitol on January 6, when a group of Trump supporters entered the Capitol complex to protest lawmakers ratifying the 2020 presidential

election results from several states, which former President Donald Trump claimed were fraudulent. In the melee that followed, a Capitol police officer fatally shot unarmed protester Ashli Babbitt. The session of Congress was paused for several hours, but lawmakers reconvened and confirmed Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's electoral victory. The incident led to a series of investigations and to the arrest of nearly 700 people, including about 210 of the participants, for assault and for impeding the work of law enforcement. Some suspects have since been placed in solitary confinement in the Washington, DC jail, prompting calls for investigation of harsh conditions and inhumane treatment in what some media outlets have referred to as the "American gulag."

The riot led Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to ban Trump's accounts on their social media platforms. Trump protested what he called acts of blatant censorship and has continued to argue that Twitter was coerced to take action by his political opponents in Congress. Facebook and Twitter have insisted that the bans are not acts of censorship but measures to ensure public safety.

In October, Trump announced that he created the social media platform TRUTH Social and the Trump Media and Technology Group (TMTG) "to stand up to the tyranny of Big Tech." The app is due to be released in 2022.

The blanket banning of Trump renewed the debate on protecting the Constitutional right to free speech in the United States, and on the increasing practice of censorship and the role social media should play in directing public discourse.

"Should they be agnostic or should they be actively editing and banning? Who makes the rules? Will Trump's followers forget him? I doubt it," author and social economics expert Erik Qualman told Sputnik.

BIDEN-PUTIN SUMMIT

In June, much of the world's attention turned to the in-person summit between presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin in Geneva. The meeting was held four months after Russia and the United States extended the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) until February 5, 2026. The New START is the only remaining legally-binding arms control accord between the two countries.

The two presidents issued a joint statement saying they agreed on the issue of strategic stability, which reaffirmed the two countries' commitment to the 1985 Gorbachev-Reagan security formula that a nuclear war cannot be won by any side. Biden and Putin also agreed on starting consultations on cyber-security, which were held by expert groups several times after the summit.

December saw two more high-level contacts between Biden and Putin — by video and phone — which focused on a range of topics from the Ukraine crisis to cyber-security. The talks took place as tensions increased on and around the Russia-Ukraine border. The United States threatened to deploy troops to the area should the situation spiral out of control. Russia has repeatedly said that it stands by its right to move forces freely within its own sovereign territory. After the first December call, Russia has put forth proposals for security guarantees, asking for a legally-binding agreement that NATO will not move eastward. The United States said it will respond to the proposals soon. The two countries agreed to hold talks on arms control and Ukraine on January 10. Negotiations on security guarantees with NATO are expected to take place on January 12 in Geneva.

US WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

The Biden administration decided in April to terminate US presence in Afghanistan after a 20-year occupation at a cost of \$2 trillion, more than 2,300 American soldiers killed and tens of thousands injured. The American president vowed to complete the withdrawal by the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks which led to the infamous US-led War on Terror and invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The United States withdrew from Afghanistan in the specified time-frame, but did so haphazardly, causing chaos at the Kabul airport, with Afghans desperately attempting to make it out of the country, and 13 American soldiers killed in a bombing perpetrated by a local branch of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

The Biden administration left behind thousands of US citizens and permanent residents, as well as military equipment worth \$85 billion.

As the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) entered Kabul, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani resigned and left the country. The Taliban created its own government, vowing that Afghanistan will not become a democracy and instead be governed in strict accordance with Islamic Sharia law.

The Biden administration appeared completely surprised at the speed with which the Afghan government fell and the country was overtaken by the Taliban, having previously assured the public that such swift developments were highly unlikely.

Even though the US faced widespread criticism over the execution of the Afghanistan pullout, it did not have a big impact on its global standing,

Nazif Mohib Shahrani, Professor of Central Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the School of Global and International Studies of Indiana University, told Sputnik.

"The US role has not changed in the world and will not change. They are after protecting their interests everywhere, regardless of its consequences to others. Remember what the US did to Afghanistan, after funding the Mujahideen defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan," he said.

Raghav Sharma, director of the Centre for Afghanistan Studies at O.P. Jindal Global University, believes that the chaotic US withdrawal did undermine Washington's credibility as a partner.

"Even countries in Asia, who looked to the United States as an ally to bridge capabilities in the light of the rise of China as a hegemon, are going to seriously reflect on their relationship with Washington in light of what transpired in Afghanistan," Sharma told Sputnik.

AUKUS PARTNERSHIP

In September, Biden, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared the formation of the new "AUKUS" defense and security partnership. The three leaders said the partnership seeks to protect and defend their shared interests in the Indo-Pacific.

The first initiative under the AUKUS alliance will be a transfer of nuclear-powered submarine technology to the Royal Australian Navy. The new arrangement nullifies the Australian government's previous agreement to obtain \$66 billion worth of diesel-electric submarines from France, causing a serious rift in the relations between Washington and Paris.

France had characterized the AUKUS submarine deal as a betrayal, and briefly recalled its ambassadors from Washington and Canberra. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called Australia's move a "stab in the back." However, the United States and France have since dispelled much of the tension after a series of diplomatic meetings.

The forming of AUKUS, and specifically the submarine agreement, provoked a harsh reaction from China, which sees the move as an attempt to contain Beijing in the Pacific region. China called the AUKUS partnership a "geopolitical gaming tool" and has urged the countries to abandon their Cold War mentality, as well as refrain from creating alliances against others.

BIDEN-XI MEETING

US President Joe Biden held a much-anticipated meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in November. The virtual summit touched upon the main issues of US-China relations, including Taiwan, the possibility of a new Cold War, as well as Iran, North Korea, Afghanistan and the coronavirus pandemic. The parties agreed that the meeting was "candid, constructive, substantive and productive." Biden and Xi also agreed to relax visa restrictions for journalists from both nations.

Biden said he told Xi that the United States supports the Taiwan Act, will not change its policy regarding Taiwan, and is not encouraging its independence. Xi reiterated that China is ready to take decisive action if separatist forces in Taiwan cross Beijing's "red line."

The meeting sought to relax tensions between the two countries, albeit for a brief period of time, and rendering this state of affairs permanent is fraught with challenges, Clyde Prestowitz, who served as a counselor to the US Secretary of Commerce in the Reagan administration, told Sputnik.

"The meeting may provide a period of calm between the United States and China. But that will be temporary," Prestowitz said, adding that he does not believe the Biden administration has a policy to "put China in its place."

PANDORA PAPERS SCANDAL

In 2021, the so-called "Pandora Papers" were added to the existing trove of information leaks. The leaks were compiled by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and released by several publications in October.

The Pandora Papers revealed a network of offshore banking accounts by the world's elite, including 35 incumbent and former leaders, and more than 330 officials engaged in tax haven practices to hide their wealth and property. The investigation was based on more than 11.9 million leaked financial documents. The papers also shed light on America's "complicity in the offshore economy," with US states, such as South Dakota and Nevada, singled out among the biggest havens for hidden wealth.

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades were among those named in the leaks.

"This is a reputational issue and the United States needs to tackle it along with other global cooperation at the United Nations and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to close down other tax havens across the world," Financial Transparency Coalition Executive Director, Matti Kohonen, told Sputnik.

Passing federal legislation in addition to engaging in international cooperation is needed to shut these tax havens down, Kohonen said.

"In Washington, it looks inconsistent to have a new rising tax haven in your own Midwest while trying to end tax-dodging by big multinational companies, and engaging in anti-corruption legislation to tackle foreign corrupt practices using the US financial system in particular," Kohonen added.

EU-BELARUS MIGRANT CRISIS

The year of 2021 saw the European Union grapple with another migrant crisis, when thousands of migrants, mainly from Iraqi Kurdistan, tried to reach Lithuania, Latvia and Poland via Belarus in July.

Since summer, thousands of migrants have gathered on the Belarusian side of the border with Poland, attempting to enter the European Union. Poland responded by tightening border security and sending more military personnel to prevent the migrants from crossing. In late November, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki emphasized that Warsaw was ready to respond to a new escalation on its border with Belarus by imposing additional sanctions on the latter.

The European Union has accused Belarus of facilitating the movement of migrants to get back at the bloc for having imposed sanctions in the first place. However, President Alexander Lukashenko specifically said Belarus no longer has the capacity to prevent the movement of migrants toward the European Union as a result of EU sanctions on his country.

In December, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, said that in 2021 the European Union recorded the highest monthly number of illegal border crossings since 2015.

POLITICAL UPHEAVAL, CHANGES

- In February, the Myanmar military seized control of the country in a coup, prompting nationwide protests. More than 1,300 people have died in clashes with the authorities during the protests. Aung San Suu Kyi, a 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was arrested along with other top officials over allegations of rigging the November 2020 elections.

In December, Aung San Suu Kyi was given a four-year sentence on charges of inciting public unrest and violating COVID-19 regulations. The United States and the United Kingdom criticized the move. Amnesty International called it an "unbridled destruction of freedoms" and the latest example of a crackdown on dissent.

- The Caribbean island nation of Haiti was shaken in July by the assassination of President Jovenel Moise at his private residence. The incident raised fears that the country might enter a spiral of violence as the interim government tightened security, while international leaders and organizations pledged support and offered condolences.

The Haitian authorities arrested more than 40 suspects, including 18 Colombian citizens and five American citizens, as well as four police officers, who were allegedly involved in Moise's assassination. Turkey also arrested a man suspected of being involved in the killing.

- In July, Cuba witnessed its largest protests since 1994, fueled by anger over shortages of basic goods and lack of freedoms. Thousands of people demanded free elections and the resolution of pressing social problems. Protests and gatherings took place in eight Cuban cities, including Havana. In response, government and Communist Party supporters held their own counter-marches.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel accused some of those who participated in protests of being paid by the US to provoke unrest. Replying to the statement, Washington stressed that it would be a "grievous mistake" on Havana's part to say that the US was involved in the protests, adding that there was every indication that the events in Cuba were spontaneous and not instigated by other countries.

- In October, the Sudanese military arrested Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and several other cabinet ministers, prompting hundreds of people to take to the streets to protest the military

takeover. At least 12 people were killed and over 100 injured during the protests. The head of Sudan's Sovereign Council, Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, declared a state of emergency and dissolved the council and government.

In response to the coup, the United States suspended \$700 million in aid to Sudan and promised to hold accountable everyone responsible for human rights abuses in the country. A month after the coup, in November, all political prisoners were freed and Abdalla Hamdok was reinstated as prime minister as part of an agreement with the civilian political parties. Hamdok and Burhan later signed a political agreement providing for the return of the ousted prime minister to his post. However, the Sudanese opposition rejected the agreement.

- 2021 marked the end of Angela Merkel's career as German chancellor. Having served in that capacity for 16 years, Merkel stepped down on December 8, leaving the position to Olaf Scholz, the chief Social Democrat who had served as vice president and finance minister since 2018. However, almost two-thirds of Germans say they believe Scholz will not be able to hold the post for more than four years, according to a poll conducted by YouGov in December.

- Austria also saw a transfer of power as Sebastian Kurz resigned as chancellor in October amid an investigation by the anti-corruption prosecutor's office against him. However, Kurz remained the head of his party and leader of the parliamentary faction. Later, Kurz announced that he was leaving politics for good. Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg succeeded Kurz for two months, saying that it was never his goal to be at the helm of their conservative party and making way for Interior Minister Karl Nehammer to take over.

- Benjamin Netanyahu was forced out as Israeli prime minister following a 12-year reign after the Knesset swore in a coalition government created by his opponents. New Israeli leader, Naftali Bennett, vowed to continue the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and ensure Israeli control over the area.

- Japan also changed its prime minister. Yoshihide Suga, who took the helm in September 2020 after his predecessor Shinzo Abe's abrupt departure for health reasons, resigned amid plummeting popularity over his handling of the coronavirus response in the wake of the Tokyo Olympics. Japanese lawmakers voted in October 2021 to approve former foreign minister Fumio Kishida, 64, as new prime minister. Kishida reiterated his commitment to efforts to resolve territorial disputes and sign a peace agreement with Russia.

IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS

With Joe Biden in office, the US agreed to indirect talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal, which former President Donald Trump quit. The JCPOA was signed in 2015 by Russia, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, China, Germany, the European Union, and Iran. The deal offered a lifting of sanctions on Iran in exchange for limitations on its nuclear program and a guarantee that Tehran would not develop nuclear weapons. After the US withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 and reinstated sanctions, Iran largely abandoned its obligations.

At the beginning of 2021, Iran's atomic energy organization announced that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20% at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. In November, the IAEA said that it planned to inspect the Fordow plant more frequently.

Iran itself saw a reshuffle at the top after chief justice Ebrahim Raisi won the June presidential election. During his inauguration, the new president pledged to seek the lifting of US sanctions that have stifled the country for years. The US, however, insists that Tehran should return to the deal first.

"The major hurdle standing in the way of reaching an agreement is whether the two sides compromise on the Iranian insistence that the US should first drop all its sanctions, and the US emphasis that Iran should first return to full compliance," University of Western Australia Adjunct Professor Amin Saikal told Sputnik.

Since April, Vienna has been hosting talks with the intention of preventing the Iran nuclear deal from collapsing altogether. The eighth round of talks to bring Iran back to the nuclear deal and lift American sanctions began in Vienna on December 27. After the previous round, which ended on December 17, the parties agreed on how to work toward the fulfillment of the JCPOA within its originally agreed parameters.

"The problem is that neither Biden nor Raisi is willing to do that [reviewing the Iran nuclear agreement] at any price. And the question is whether the price that's being asked either by Biden or by Raisi is the price that the other can meet," James Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, explained to Sputnik.

In late December, Mohammad Eslami, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization (AEOI), told Sputnik that Tehran does not intend to exceed the 60% level of uranium enrichment, even if the parties to the Vienna talks fail to reach an agreement and the United States does not lift its sanctions.

"The demand or expectation on the Iranian side that all sanctions be removed -- not just those specifically related to the nuclear file -- has not, and likely will not be accepted by the Biden administration. The latter's insistence that Iran return to full compliance with the JCPOA as a condition of receiving sanctions relief is unlikely to be received favorably by Tehran," John Calabrese, who teaches US foreign policy at the American University in Washington, told Sputnik.

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RPT - US Likely Set Up Base in Albania to Counter China - Ex-CIA Analyst

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - One reason the US military may have opened a special operations command in Albania is because Washington is concerned about Tirana's ties with China, former CIA analyst Ray McGovern told Sputnik.

On Friday, US European Command (EUCOM) said it was establishing a special operations headquarters in Albania as part of an effort to boost capabilities as a keystone for regional stability. EUCOM also said the base offers increased interoperability with US Albanian allies and important access to transportation hubs in the Balkans.

McGovern said Washington decided to locate a base there "because they [the US] just learned that Albania is a tight ally of the Chinese Communists."

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in a recent analysis identified 135 Chinese-linked projects in the region worth more than \$36 billion. The types of projects range from collaboration with Chinese tech firm Huawei, blacklisted by the US as a security threat, to metallurgy, mining, energy, and transport initiatives.

China has also expanded its influence in the region via a number of bilateral security, medical, and cultural agreements in addition to vaccine donations.

Albanian President Ilir Meta during a meeting with visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in October said that cooperation between the two countries has great potential. The two sides also agreed to boost trade while China signaled that it stands ready to work with Albania to forge high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, Xinhua reported after their meeting.

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RPT - US, Foreign NGOs May Have Played Key Role in Social Unrest in Kazakhstan - Expert

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Generous funding from international non-government organizations (NGOs) and the US government has played a key role in the social unrest that has gripped Kazakhstan in recent days, Executive Vice President of Eurasia Group Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik.

The beginning of 2022 in Kazakhstan was marked by the outbreak of riots in the streets of Almaty, which was presumably caused by a two-fold increase in the price of liquefied gas in the country after the abolition of state subsidies. Attempts to pacify the angry crowds were unsuccessful and the rally quickly turned into a political manifestation, accompanied by violent attacks on law enforcement officers and pogroms of state institutions in a number of Kazakh cities.

"The official story is that [it is] due to the elimination of gas price controls, which resulted in approximately a \$1 per gallon increase in gas (LNG). If these are the real reasons for the unrest, perhaps we should be rioting here [in the US] as well," Rasmussen said.

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) estimates there are 38,000 active NGOs in Kazakhstan while the majority of them is funded by the United States and European countries by way of grants and donations.

"[I]t appears that the US funds and foreign NGOs have done quite well based on the uneasiness within the country," Rasmussen said. "Moreover, the UK has over 85 NGOs also present in Kazakhstan and have provided significant funding to provide "civil society and rule of law."

The most active participants in the political and social processes in Kazakhstan are such entities as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy, the American Bar Association, Freedom House and many others, Rasmussen added.

The National Endowment for Democracy alone spent more than \$1 million to support democratic processes and human rights movements in Kazakhstan in 2020, according to data published by the organization. The recipients of the funds in Kazakhstan worked to raise the level of youth's engagement into social and political processes, support the allegedly independent mass media, as well as to protect civil society institutions.

The US government is the major source of funding for the so-called "democratic" forces in Kazakhstan and when it does not finance some activities directly through the State Department

or USAID, it sends funds in the form of grants to the various organizations and individuals, including citizens of Kazakhstan.

In 2020, US agencies wired as much as \$61 million in foreign assistance to Kazakhstan, according to the official data figures.

Indeed, in 2021 the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor announced a program to support freedom of association in Kazakhstan and allocated \$750,000 for this cause.

Another grant worth \$740,740 was announced in December with the focus on promoting international standards of religious freedom in Kazakhstan.

The American Corners program was announced by the US State Department in 2021 to promote American values, culture and studies in the US across the ten largest cities in Kazakhstan, including Almaty, Pavlodar, Aktobe, Nur-Sultan, and Karaganda.

According to the programs and grants descriptions, Kazakh youth presents the main interest for those foreign entities, which claim to care about democracy and human rights in this Central Asian state.

"Moreover, while it is difficult to discern the actual organizer or if there is a single entity, much of the demands seem to be coming from opposition forces abroad. These demands documented in several sources include: Release of political prisoners; Resignation of the president and government and withdrawal from agreements with Russia to include the EAEU (Eurasia Economic Union)," Rasmussen said.

Kazakhstan presents a strategic interest to Russia as it has a border with Russia of over 7,000 kilometers (4,350 miles), a large ethnic Russian population, and is home of Russia's space facilities in Baikonur, the expert underscored. The country plays a key role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

"I find it interesting that the unrest seemed somewhat coordinated across the country occurring during the Orthodox Christmas period and just before the US-Russia security dialogue. Coincidence? One needs to wonder!" Rasmussen concluded.

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US Likely Set Up Base in Albania to Counter China - Ex-CIA Analyst

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with Chinese tech firm Huawei, blacklisted by the US as a security threat, to metallurgy, mining, energy, and transport initiatives.

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Albanian President Ilir Meta during a meeting with visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in October said that cooperation between the two countries has great potential. The two sides also agreed to boost trade while China signaled that it stands ready to work with Albania to forge high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, Xinhua reported after their meeting.

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US Trade Chief Discusses With EU Official Support for Lithuania Amid China Row

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Trade Representative Katherine Tai discussed with a senior European Union official the United States' support for the bloc after the diplomatic row between China and Lithuania due to the latter's decision to allow the opening of a Taiwanese

representative office in the country, the US Trade Representative (USTR) office said in a readout of the conversation.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai today spoke with European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis and expressed the United States' strong support for the EU and for Lithuania in the face of economic coercion from the People's Republic of China," the readout said on Friday.

Tai emphasized the importance of working together with the European Union to address coercive diplomatic and economic behavior through various avenues such as the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, the readout said.

The two leaders also discussed ongoing joint efforts to address global non-market excess capacity in the steel and aluminum sectors, and agreed to stay in regular communication on the array of important issues, the readout added.

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Kazakh Protests Show Pattern of West-Directed 'Color Revolution' - Ex-Diplomat

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The anti-government violent riots and protests across Kazakhstan already show the classic pattern of a so-called "color revolution" directed and planned from the West, former Canadian diplomat Patrick Armstrong told Sputnik.

Initially peaceful protests in Kazakhstan, sparked by a twofold increase in fuel prices on January 1, quickly turned into violent clashes which have left seven police officers and dozens of attackers dead, according to authorities.

"Clearly there are underlying causes that would make people protest. But color revolution organizers take that unrest and direct it. Which we see in Kazakhstan - the sudden appearance of armed groups, a 'leader' sitting outside the country, the usual Western NGOs acting over time, [and] demands that involve geopolitical moves away from Russia," Armstrong said.

Nearly 38,000 civil society organizations, most of which are funded by the United States and European countries, currently operate in Kazakhstan, according to the International Center for Non-Profit Law. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Freedom House and other US-based organizations are also active there.

The NED sent around \$1 million in 2020 to at least 20 civic organizations in Kazakhstan. The organization has not responded to a Sputnik inquiry on Thursday about its 2021 figures. In 2021, the State Department sent a \$750,000 grant to the Support of Freedom of Association in Kazakhstan.

Armstrong also said the timing of the unrest is interesting, coming shortly before the Russian-US security talks.

"One observes that typical color revolution pattern takes some time to get to the fire-setting and shooting phase - this one got there almost immediately. An attempt by somebody to undermine the talks?" Armstrong said.

However, former USAID consultant Paolo von Schirach does not believe the unrest represents a coup or organized insurrection.

"The truth is that this is a spontaneous revolt of the hungry and the angry," Schirach, Chair of Political Science & International Relations at Bay Atlantic University and President of the Global Policy Institute, said. "Kazakhstan is a potentially rich country endowed with substantial oil and gas reserves and other mineral riches."

On Wednesday, Tokayev dismissed the government and superseded the first president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, as the head of the republic's Security Council. Tokayev will appoint the republic's new prime minister on January 11, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

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US Appeals Court Revives Investor Lawsuit Against Boeing Over 737 MAX Crashes - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals revived an investor lawsuit against the aerospace company Boeing over two 737 MAX crashes in Indonesia and Ethiopia in 2018 and 2019, according to a court opinion written by Judge David Hamilton.

"The suit alleges that Boeing officers and board members made materially false and misleading public statements about the development and operation of the 737 MAX in Boeing's 2017, 2018, and 2019 proxy materials. The district court dismissed the suit without addressing the merits, applying a Boeing bylaw that gives the company the right to insist that any derivative actions be filed in the Delaware Court of Chancery. We reverse," Hamilton said in the opinion, filed on Friday.

Two Boeing 737 MAX passenger airlines crashed, one in Indonesia in October of 2018 and the other in Ethiopia in March of 2019, killing a total of 346 people. Investigators found faulty patches that Boeing implemented to solve problems with the aircraft.

The plaintiff in the case, Seafarers Pension Plan, a shareholder of the Boeing Company, filed the derivative suit in December 2019 on behalf of Boeing under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934.

Because the federal Securities Exchange Act gives federal courts exclusive jurisdiction over actions under it, applying a Boeing bylaw requiring certain shareholder lawsuits to be filed in Delaware Chancery Court, this case would mean that the lawsuit would not be hearable in any forum, which would be contrary to Delaware corporation law, Hamilton said.

The court's decision will allow the lawsuit to move forward, meaning Boeing and its board will face litigation over the allegations that they misled investors about the 737 MAX airplanes prior to the two crashes.

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US Urges Allies to Treat With Skepticism Russia's Comments After Security Talks - Official

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on its allies and partners to treat with scepticism Russia's public comments after Monday's security talks, a senior US State Department official said.

"We fully expect that the Russian side will make public comments following the meeting on Monday that will not reflect the true nature of the discussions that took place," the official said during a conference call on Friday. "We would urge our allies and partners to view those comments with extreme skepticism and to continue their ongoing discussions and coordination with the United States."

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Wall Street's Nasdaq Has Worst Tumble in 11 Months Based on US Interest Rate Hike Fears

NEW YORK, January 7 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's Big Tech sector tumbled almost 5% on the week for its biggest weekly loss in almost a year as fears of a faster-than-expected US interest rate hike triggered broad risk aversion across financial markets.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which groups highly-valued tech stocks such as Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Netflix, closed down Friday's trade down almost 1% at 14,936 - its first decline below 15,000 points since December 20.

For the week, the Big Tech indicator plunged 4.9%, its most for a week since the week ended February 21.

Risk aversion in stocks heightened on Friday after a US jobs report showed the country having reached the Federal Reserve's definition of "maximum employment" with a jobless rate just shy of 4%, despite adding just 199,000 jobs in December versus expectations for 450,000 jobs.

"Wall Street is focusing on the robust prints with wages and the unemployment rate," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

Moya noted that wages in the so-called non-farm payrolls, or NFP, report rose 0.6% in December alone and 4.7% for all of 2021.

"After the initial dust settled from the NFP report, expectations for a March Fed rate hike rose from around 74% to 80%," he added.

The Federal Reserve has kept US interest rates at near zero since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. It is considering as many as three rate hikes in 2022 to tamp down inflation growing at its fastest pace in 40 years. The first pandemic-era rate hike is due anytime between the end of the first quarter and middle of the year.

Due to its high valuation, Nasdaq always falls the hardest in any stock market rout, though it is also often the biggest winner in a rally. Last year, it ended up 21%.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, fell 0.4% on the day and 1.9% on the week for its biggest slide since the week to November 21.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which groups blue chips of mostly industrial stocks, fared the best among Wall Street indicators. It ended almost flat on Friday, while dropping just 0.3% on the week.

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US to Provide Ukraine With More Security Aid if Situation With Russia Escalates - Official

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide additional security assistance to Ukraine should the situation with Russia escalate, a senior US State Department official said.

"Should Russia further invade Ukraine, we will provide additional defensive material to the Ukrainians above and beyond that which we already are in the process of providing," the official said during a conference call on Friday.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have increased in the past several weeks amid an alleged Russian troops buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying it has the right to relocate troops within its sovereign territory and at its own discretion, while making it clear that NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its security.

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Russia's Call to Remove Nuclear Weapons From Allies' Territory 'Problematic'- State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States finds Russia's calls to remove nuclear arsenal from allies' territory in Europe to be "problematic" and NATO will remain a nuclear alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist, a senior State Department official said during a press briefing.

"Russia has repeatedly called publicly for the US to remove its deployed nuclear weapons from ally territory. So, the calling for that is not anything that we haven't heard before. But, you know, we've made clear to Russia in the past that those are really problematic for the United States, and we have affirmed that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance," the official said on Friday.

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US Prepared to Sanction Russia on Day 1 if Moscow Escalates in Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States wants to be prepared together with its allies and partners to impose sanctions on Russia on day one of any potential escalation of the situation with respect to Ukraine, a senior State Department official told reporters.

"[W]e have been in very close consultation with both allies and partners about the deterrence piece of our policy. For now, crafting a common package of sanctions is intended as deterrence. But we also want to be prepared if the Russians do further invade Ukraine to be ready on day one to put that sanctions package into effect," the official said during a press briefing on Friday.

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US Not Weighing Options to Pull Back Troops in Eastern Europe - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - A report that the United States is ready to discuss with Russia the possibility of scaling down the number of American troops in Eastern Europe is not accurate, a senior State Department official said.

"It is not accurate that the US administration is developing options for pulling back US forces in Eastern Europe," the official said during a conference call on Friday.

Earlier in the day, US media reported that the Biden administration is ready to propose in the upcoming bilateral meeting the possibility of scaling back the number of American troops in Eastern Europe.

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US Wants to Hear From Russia, Have Dialogue at Security Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is willing to hear Russian positions and hopes to have a dialogue with Moscow during security negotiations next week, a senior State Department official said during a press briefing.

"We also want to hear what the Russians have to say. So, we won't necessarily say we're not going to listen to you or whatever because we are wanting to have a dialogue with them [Russia], and part of the dialogue is to hear what they have to say and to express our own concerns," the official said on Friday.

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US Hopes for Constructive Series of Security Talks With Russia Next Week - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States hopes to have a constructive series of security talks with Russia next week, a senior State Department official said.

"Our hope and intent is that it will also be a constructive week," the official said during a conference call on Friday regarding the upcoming bilateral talks with Russia, as well as NATO-Russia Council and OSCE meetings.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) -

KAZAKHSTAN DEVELOPMENTS

- * Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said on Friday that among those who had launched several attacks on Almaty over the past several days were militants that did not speak the Kazakh language.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin held a number of phone calls with the leaders Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states, including Tokayev, to discuss the situation in Kazakhstan and joint efforts to counter international terrorism and ensure order in Kazakhstan, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * China is against external forces sparking unrest and "color revolution" in Kazakhstan, Chinese leader Xi Jinping said.
- * US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it is unclear why Kazakhstan had asked the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for assistance amid the unrest in the country when it has the capacity to deal with the ongoing crisis.

US-RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

- * The United States is prepared to reconfirm to Russia its readiness to increase transparency and institute new risk-reduction measures if Russia scales back its military activity near Ukraine's border, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.
- * Blinken said that NATO's defensive posture would have to strengthen further if Russia does not de-escalate its military activity near Ukraine.
- * Blinken said that Moscow has been driving a false narrative that NATO is threatening Russia.
- * NATO member-states have agreed upon the format of the upcoming meeting with Russia, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said.

IRAN NUCLEAR TALKS

- * Participants in the Vienna talks acknowledge that progress has been made toward restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and lifting the US sanctions on Iran, though more efforts are needed, the permanent representative of Russia to international organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said on Friday.
- * French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that he is optimistic about the possibility of reaching an agreement to restore the JCPOA on the Iranian nuclear program, and that talks have recently taken a promising course.

COVID-19

- * COVID-19 is likely to stay but the so-called "new normal" does not have to be given the existing and developing tools to fight the coronavirus, President Joe Biden said on Friday.
- * The US Supreme Court heard oral arguments in two cases involving the enforcement of the Biden administration's workplace COVID-19 vaccine mandates enforced through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).
- * Germany has tightened existing restrictions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and prepares to introduce compulsory vaccination, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said.

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US OKs \$300Mln Reaper Drone Support Sale to France - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the potential sale of \$300 million in spare and replacement components and other support services for MQ-9 Reaper drones to France, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of France of MQ-9 Follow-on Contractor Logistics Support and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$300 million," the agency said in a press release.

The deal will include aircraft components, simulator software, training, and technical documents, the release added.

The proposed sale will improve France's capability to meet current and future threats by ensuring the operational readiness of the French Air Force.

France's MQ-9 aircraft fleet provides Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance support that directly supports U.S. and coalition operations around the world, the agency explained.

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UN Chief Welcomes Release of Opposition Members in Ethiopia, Calls for Ceasefire

UNITED NATIONS, January 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday welcomed the release of members of the opposition in Ethiopia and called on the parties to build on this significant step by reaching a lasting ceasefire.

"I welcome today's release from prison in Ethiopia of numerous detainees, including key opposition figures," Guterres said in a statement. "I call upon the parties to build on this significant confidence-building step by agreeing a cessation of hostilities and a lasting ceasefire, as well as launching a credible and inclusive national dialogue and reconciliation process."

Guterres also said he looked forward to meaningful progress in humanitarian access to all areas in Ethiopia affected by the war following his last contact with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

In December, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has been fighting the government forces since the military conflict broke out in November 2020, said it would pull back to bring forth an end to the bloodshed.

The government said it would not send troops into TPLF-controlled Tigray region to conserve resources and avoid further accusations of genocide but noted that it stands ready to order its forces to go into the region, whenever deemed necessary.

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Biden Administration Awards First Contract for Rapid COVID Test Kits

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US government awarded a contract worth over \$50 million for the distribution of over-the-counter COVID-19 test kits, the Defense Department said on Friday.

"The US... awarded a \$51.6 million contract to Goldbelt Security, located in Newport News, Virginia, for delivery of over-the-counter COVID-19 test kits," the Defense Department said. This initial contract is expected to be followed by more in the coming weeks, officials said, according to CNN.

The contract was issued as part of President Joe Biden's plan to deliver 500 million at-home COVID-19 tests to the American people at no cost in response to the Omicron variant, the release added.

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Webb Space Telescope Primary Mirror Panel Successfully Deployed - NASA

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - NASA technicians have successfully deployed and secured the first of two primary mirror wings of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) now more than 600,000 miles from earth, the US space agency announced in an official blog report on Friday.

"Webb's iconic primary mirror is taking its final shape," the report said. "Today, the first of two primary mirror wings, or side panels, was deployed and latched successfully. Each side panel holds three primary mirror segments that were engineered to fold back to reduce Webb's overall profile for flight."

Engineers confirmed that the panel was fully secured and locked into place and the deployment complete by early afternoon.

Now that the telescope's port side wing panel is locked in place, ground teams will prepare to deploy and latch the starboard (right side) panel on Saturday. Upon completion, Webb will have concluded its major deployment sequence, the NASA blog said.

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US Has Questions About Nature of Russia's Presence in Kazakhstan - White House

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has questions as to the nature and need of Russian peacekeeping troops' presence in Kazakhstan and notes that the entire world will be watching for human rights violations in the country amid ongoing violent clashes between protesters and state law enforcement, White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"We have questions about the nature and need of Russia's presence. So, the world will be watching as it relates to Kazakhstan. As you're asking me, the world will be watching for any violation of human rights. We call on everyone to uphold international human rights obligations, practice restraint and bring an end to this crisis."

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Three Men Convicted in Ahmaud Arbery Murder Sentenced to Life in Prison - US Judge

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Judge Timothy Walmsley on Friday sentenced the three men convicted with murdering black jogger Ahmaud Arbery to life in prison, two without the possibility of parole for their crimes.

The court sentenced Travis McMichael and Greg McMichael to life in prison without the possibility of parole and William Bryan to life in prison with the possibility of parole.

A jury in November found the three men guilty on charges including murder, aggravated assault and false imprisonment for shooting and killing Arbery after pursuing the jogger in their trucks in February, 2020. The incident gained widespread attention after footage of the murder went viral in May 2020.

Arbery's parents during the sentencing hearing asked Walmsley to sentence the men to life in prison without the possibility of parole for the crime. The state also requested sentences of life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The men's lawyer unsuccessfully argued that the men should be given the possibility of parole and redemption. The minimum sentence for murder in the state of Georgia is life in prison. The men may file an appeal for their sentences to the court, Walmsley added.

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Biden Accepts Pelosi Invite to Give State of the Union Address on March 1 - White House

WASHINGTON. January 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden accepted House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's invitation to deliver the State of the Union address to Congress on March 1, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"The President has accepted the invitation of the Speaker of the House to deliver the State of the Union address on Tuesday, March 1, 2022," Jean-Pierre told reporters.

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Citigroup to Terminate Unvaccinated Workers by End of January - Reports

NEW YORK, January 7 (Sputnik) - Citigroup will fire by the end of this month employees who do not get vaccinated for the COVID-19 as it becomes the first major Wall Street institution to enforce such mandates for the virus in a tough way, CNBC reported on Friday, citing a company memo.

In October, Citigroup in a memo gave workers until January 14 to submit proof that they were fully vaccinated.

Those who did not comply will be put on unpaid leave by the end of next week, and their last day of employment will be January 31, the report said.

Vaccination mandates have been among the testiest of issues caused by the coronavirus pandemic as millions of Americans resist getting jabbed for the COVID-19 due to political, religious and other beliefs.

Citigroup Human Resources chief Sara Wechter in an advisory posted on the LinkedIn website in October addressed those concerns, saying that it has become "crystal clear that COVID-19 will not be going away any time soon" and that Citigroup has thought "long and hard about how we navigate the latest stages of the pandemic".

She said the company's decision came down to two key factors: first, as a large and important institution serving the US government, it had an obligation to comply with the executive order issued by the White House mandating that individuals supporting government contracts be fully vaccinated; Second, having a vaccinated workforce enabled it to ensure the health and safety of all its employees.

Wechter added though that Citigroup will "assess all requests for religious, medical or any other accommodation required by state or local law on a case by case basis" for exemptions to the rule.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 61.4% of the total US population is fully vaccinated, and about 32.1% of fully vaccinated adults have received a booster. The rest remained either completely unvaccinated or without boosters.

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US, Foreign NGOs May Have Played Key Role in Social Unrest in Kazakhstan - Expert

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Generous funding from international non-government organizations (NGOs) and the US government has played a key role in the social unrest that has gripped Kazakhstan in recent days, Executive Vice President of Eurasia Group Earl Rasmussen told Sputnik on Friday.

The beginning of 2022 in Kazakhstan was marked by the outbreak of riots in the streets of Almaty, which was presumably caused by a two-fold increase in the price of liquefied gas in the country after the abolition of state subsidies. Attempts to pacify the angry crowds were unsuccessful and the rally quickly turned into a political manifestation, accompanied by violent attacks on law enforcement officers and pogroms of state institutions in a number of Kazakh cities.

"The official story is that [it is] due to the elimination of gas price controls, which resulted in approximately a \$1 per gallon increase in gas (LNG). If these are the real reasons for the unrest, perhaps we should be rioting here [in the US] as well," Rasmussen said.

The International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) estimates there are 38,000 active NGOs in Kazakhstan while the majority of them is funded by the United States and European countries by way of grants and donations.

"[I]t appears that the US funds and foreign NGOs have done quite well based on the uneasiness within the country," Rasmussen said. "Moreover, the UK has over 85 NGOs also present in Kazakhstan and have provided significant funding to provide "civil society and rule of law."

The most active participants in the political and social processes in Kazakhstan are such entities as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy, the American Bar Association, Freedom House and many others, Rasmussen added.

The National Endowment for Democracy alone spent more than \$1 million to support democratic processes and human rights movements in Kazakhstan in 2020, according to data published by the organization. The recipients of the funds in Kazakhstan worked to raise the level of youth's engagement into social and political processes, support the allegedly independent mass media, as well as to protect civil society institutions.

The US government is the major source of funding for the so-called "democratic" forces in Kazakhstan and when it does not finance some activities directly through the State Department or USAID, it sends funds in the form of grants to the various organizations and individuals, including citizens of Kazakhstan.

In 2020, US agencies wired as much as \$61 million in foreign assistance to Kazakhstan, according to the official data figures.

Indeed, in 2021 the US Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor announced a program to support freedom of association in Kazakhstan and allocated \$750,000 for this cause.

Another grant worth \$740,740 was announced in December with the focus on promoting international standards of religious freedom in Kazakhstan.

The American Corners program was announced by the US State Department in 2021 to promote American values, culture and studies in the US across the ten largest cities in Kazakhstan, including Almaty, Pavlodar, Aktobe, Nur-Sultan, and Karaganda.

According to the programs and grants descriptions, Kazakh youth presents the main interest for those foreign entities, which claim to care about democracy and human rights in this Central Asian state.

"Moreover, while it is difficult to discern the actual organizer or if there is a single entity, much of the demands seem to be coming from opposition forces abroad. These demands documented in several sources include: Release of political prisoners; Resignation of the president and government and withdrawal from agreements with Russia to include the EAEU (Eurasia Economic Union)," Rasmussen said.

Kazakhstan presents a strategic interest to Russia as it has a border with Russia of over 7,000 kilometers (4,350 miles), a large ethnic Russian population, and is home of Russia's space facilities in Baikonur, the expert underscored. The country plays a key role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

"I find it interesting that the unrest seemed somewhat coordinated across the country occurring during the Orthodox Christmas period and just before the US-Russia security dialogue. Coincidence? One needs to wonder!" Rasmussen concluded.

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Blinken: Unclear Why Kazakhstan Needs CSTO Help With Country Capable to Deal With Crisis (Updates with details, background in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that it is unclear why Kazakhstan had asked the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for assistance amid the unrest in the country when it has the capacity to deal with the ongoing crisis.

"It would seem to me that the Kazakh authorities and the government certainly have the capacity to deal appropriately with protests and to do so in a way that respects the rights of protesters while maintaining law and order," Blinken said. "So it's not clear why they feel the need for any outside assistance, so we're trying to learn more about it."

The United States calls on the CSTO peacekeeping forces and Kazakhstan law enforcement to adhere to international human rights standards to support a peaceful resolution of the crisis, Blinken added.

Blinken said that he believes it may be difficult to get Russian forces out of the country once order is restored.

The United States has questions about the deployment of CSTO peacekeepers to Kazakhstan and is learning more about it, Blinken said.

Blinken called on peacekeeping forces to adhere to international laws.

People have been protesting in Kazakhstan since a twofold increase in gas prices on January 1. Despite the government's attempts to manage the situation and promises to decrease prices, peaceful protests turned into clashes with law enforcement officers in several regions of the republic, including the largest city of Almaty. The government introduced an internet blackout and declared a country-wide state of emergency. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev

asked for the CSTO's assistance in resolving the issue. The first contingent of the CSTO Collective Peacekeeping Forces arrived to Kazakhstan on Thursday.

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Biden Says COVID-19 Here to Stay But New Normal 'Does Not Have to Be'

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - COVID-19 is likely to stay but the so-called new normal doesnot have to be given the existing and developing tools to fight the coronavirus, President Joe Biden said on Friday.

"Having COVID-19 in the environment here, in the world, is probably here to stay. But COVID-19, as we're dealing with it now, is not here to stay. The new normal doesn't have to be. We have so many more tools we're developing and will continue to develop that can contain COVID-19 and other strains of COVID-19," Biden said.

The US president said recovery statistics from the pandemic, as well as testing for the virus, were both markedly higher than a year ago, but government measures will lead to things returning to normal.

"We still have problems but 90% of the schools are open," Biden said. "And you know how we're dealing with testing. We've had 300 million tests per month so far; that's an even 10 million tests a day. In addition to that, we're in the process of ordering 500,000 new tests. So we're going to be able to control this. The new normal is not going to be what it is now. It's going to be better," he said.

The United States saw roughly 1 million new coronavirus infections daily at the start of this week and hundreds of thousands of cases per day since, including nearly 800,000 on Thursday. Health officials have said 95% of the new cases were from the coronavirus Omicron variant. However, health officials have also said the Omicron cases are mild and there have been no deaths reported from this variant.

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UN Spokesperson Says Killing of Police, Protesters in Kazakhstan 'Unacceptable'

UNITED NATIONS, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations views the killing of demonstrators and police officers in Kazakhstan's protests as unacceptable, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"I think it's important that there be a stop to the violence. People demonstrating should do so peacefully. The killing of police officers and others is unacceptable. The killing of demonstrators is as well," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The spokesman said the United Nations continues to monitor the situation in Kazakhstan "very closely" and appeals to all involved parties to show restraint, avoid violence and resolve the crisis through peaceful means.

"There is a need in any situation to respect human rights and international standards while reestablishing public order," Dujarric added.

Protests erupted in Kazakhstan after the authorities implemented a twofold increase in gas prices on January 1. Despite the government's attempts to manage the situation and promises to decrease prices, the protests turned into riots complete with looting and clashes with law enforcement officers in several regions, including the largest city of Almaty.

The government introduced a country-wide state of emergency, and invited the Collective Security Treaty Organization peacekeeping forces to assist in bringing the situation under control.

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Blinken: Unclear Why Kazakhstan Needs CSTO Help While Country Capable to Deal With Crisis

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"It would seem to me that the Kazakh authorities and the government certainly have the capacity to deal appropriately with protests and to do so in a way that respects the rights of protesters while maintaining law and order," Blinken said. "So it's not clear why they feel the need for any outside assistance, so we're trying to learn more about it."

The United States calls on the CSTO peacekeeping forces and Kazakhstan law enforcement to adhere to international human rights standards to support a peaceful resolution of the crisis, Blinken added.

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Austin, Latvian Counterpart Discuss Situation on NATO's Eastern Flank - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin discussed with Latvian counterpart Artis Pabriks the current situation along NATO's eastern flank and the importance of enhancing readiness and interoperability of forces, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a readout of the conversation on Friday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke by phone with Latvian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Artis Pabriks today to discuss the current situation along NATO's Eastern Flank and reaffirm the strong relationship between the United States and Latvia... The

two leaders emphasized the importance of enhancing readiness and interoperability between the U.S. and Latvian National Armed Forces," Kirby said.

The two officials discussed a wide range of bilateral defense issues including unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as Russia's destabilizing actions in eastern Europe, Kirby added.

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US Supreme Court Hears Arguments in Biden Administration COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate Cases

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court on Friday heard oral arguments in two cases involving the enforcement of the Biden administration's workplace COVID-19 vaccine mandates enforced through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS).

The courts have been asked to issue a stay and temporarily block the enforcement of the OSHA mandate as well as reject the government's request to dissolve a prior court's injunction that stopped the enforcement of the CMS mandate.

The OSHA mandate would require employers with 100 or more workers to require either COVID-19 vaccination or active testing and workplace masking. The CMS mandate would allow the termination of participation in Medicare and Medicaid programs for healthcare facilities who do not require non-exempt workers to be fully vaccinated.

OSHA could have offered guidance or policies other than a vaccine mandate and lacks the ability to set a nationwide COVID-19 policy by emergency rule, said Scott Keller, an attorney representing the National Federation of Independent Business - the organization challenging the Biden vaccine mandate.

Lawyers representing the government argued that OSHA believes that the unvaccinated are at greater risk of contracting and spreading the coronavirus at work and that Congress has already granted OSHA the authority to enact such a measure under the Occupational Safety and Health Act that founded them.

In November, courts blocked the enforcement of the CMS vaccine mandate for healthcare workers. Lawyers representing those challenging the mandate argued that unlike masking and other health measures that are temporary and restricted to work, vaccines are not removable and apply to life outside the healthcare setting.

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US Believes Ukraine Fulfilled Minsk Accords, While Russia Done Virtually Nothing - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States believes Ukraine has fulfilled or is working on implementing the Minsk agreements, while Russia has done virtually nothing, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"There's a long list of things that each side has to do under Minsk, and by and large, Ukraine has done or is engaged in doing most of what it was required to do. There are some things that are outstanding that are important," Blinken said during a press briefing.

"Go down the list, Russia has done virtually none of it. And in fact, not only is it not doing what it's required to do, it is actively doing the opposite in many areas," he said.

The United States believes that the way to resolve the differences in Donbas is through the Minsk agreements and Washington remains fully prepared to try to facilitate their implementation, Blinken said.

"This is a test for Russia if it is serious about resolving the situation in eastern Ukraine, and to resolve it diplomatically and peacefully, Minsk is the way to do it," he added.

The conflict in the East-Ukrainian region of Donbas between Kiev and the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk republics has been going on since 2014. Despite the Minsk Agreements, designed to find a political resolution to the conflict, clashes in Donbas still continue.

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US December Job Gains Underwhelm But Fed's 'Maximum Employment' Goal Reached - Labor Dept

(Updates with comments, more details in paras 3-11)

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US employers added 199,000 jobs in the month of December, underperforming economists' expectations by more than a half but the country still achieved the "maximum employment rate" as defined by the Federal Reserve, government data showed on Friday.

"Total non-farm payroll employment rose by 199,000 in December, and the unemployment rate declined to 3.9 percent," the US Labor Department said in a news release.

In November, job gains stood at 210,000.

Economists polled by US media had forecast an addition of 450,000 positions in December, and the Labor Department reported less than half of expectations.

But the Labor Department still said that the unemployment rate slid to 3.9% last month from November's 4.2%. Any jobless rate of 4% or below is defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Economists took that positively, despite the underwhelming jobs numbers for December.

"The headline ... is disappointing once again," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "But there's plenty of fuel here to believe whatever you like. All the evidence I see points to robust hiring everywhere."

The global outbreak of the coronavirus two years ago sent the US economy into a tailspin and unemployment to a record of 14.8% by April 2020. Since then, the world's largest economy has added hundreds of thousands of jobs a month, even crossing the 1 million mark at times.

President Joe Biden commented on the recovery on Friday, noting that it was the fastest growth in employment from a recession.

"We added 6.4 million new jobs since January last year; that's the most jobs in any calendar year," Biden told reporters at the White House. "We went from 20 million people on unemployment rolls a year ago to under 2 million people on the unemployment rolls. Today, America is back to work."

Aside from the sheer improvement in jobs numbers over the past two years, the US labor market is seeing one its greatest transformations ever after COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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US Ready to Reconfirm to Russia Readiness to Institute Risk-Reduction Measures - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is prepared to reconfirm to Russia its readiness to increase transparency and institute new risk-reduction measures if Russia scales back its military activity near Ukraine's border, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday.

"Next week, we'll reconfirm our readiness to increase transparency, institute new risk-reduction measures renew efforts to address nuclear and conventional threats to European security," Blinken said during a press briefing.

Blinken said the United States wants a predictable and stable relationship with Russia and emphasized that both countries can improve overall security.

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Blinken Says NATO's Defense Posture Must Strengthen Further if Russia Does Not De-Escalate

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that NATO's defensive posture would have to strengthen further if Russia does not de-escalate its military activity near Ukraine.

"We've talked about financial and economic measures, certainly NATO's defensive posture will have to strengthen even further, assistance to Ukraine to defend itself will continue," Blinken said during a press briefing.

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Blinken Says Moscow Driving False Narrative That NATO Threatens Russia

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that Moscow has been driving a false narrative that NATO is threatening Russia.

"Moscow is simultaneously driving the false narrative that NATO is threatening Russia," Blinken said.

Blinken pointed out NATO never promised Russia not to move eastward by adding new members to the alliance.

"NATO never promised not to admit new members. It could not and would not. The open-door policy was a core provision of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty that founded NATO," Blinken said.

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Blinken Says Diplomatic Solution Over Ukraine With Russia Still Possible, Preferable

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that a diplomatic solution to Russia's military build-up at the Ukrainian border is still possible and preferable.

"We're prepared to respond forcefully to further Russian aggression. But a diplomatic solution is still possible and preferable if Russia chooses," Blinken said in remarks ahead of the next week's meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and the US-Russia strategic stability dialogue.

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UN Condemns 'Horrific' Killing of 2 Journalists Burned Alive in Haiti - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations condemns the murder of two journalists who were burned alive by a gang in Haiti, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

Earlier in the day, media reported that two journalists have been killed in the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince after interviewing a lord of a criminal group.

"Sometimes you run out of words," Dujarric said when asked to comment on the killing of the two journalists.

"We clearly condemn this horrific murder. It is very important that the national authorities do whatever they can to find the perpetrators, bring them to justice," Dujarric added.

The Haiti24 news outlet reported that the two journalists came under fire from armed members of a criminal group.

A third journalist managed to escape from the site of the attack, the report said.

Haiti has been facing a prolonged period of poverty, gang violence and political crisis, exacerbated by the assassination of President Jovenel Moise in July of 2021.

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US House Speaker Pelosi Invites Biden to Give State of the Union Address on March 1

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Friday invited President Joe Biden to deliver his State of the Union address to Congress on March 1 "I am writing to invite you to address a Joint Session of Congress on Tuesday, March 1, to share your vision of the State of the Union," Pelosi said in a letter to Biden. "Indeed, this past year has been historic: with the life-saving American Rescue Plan, once-in-a-century Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and, soon, the truly transformational Build Back Better Act!"

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CDC Director Says Unsure if People More or Less Susceptible to Omicron Reinfection

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky said on Friday that it is not clear yet whether people who got the coronavirus Omicron variant are more likely or less likely to get re-infected again. "We don't yet know whether, if you had Omicron, you are more susceptible or less susceptible to another infection with Omicron," Walensky said in the first CDC independent press briefing since the summer of 2021. Walensky pointed out that since Omicron became the most dominant coronavirus variant in the United States, hospitalization rates have increased for people of all ages, including children. "We are in unprecedented times with the Omicron cases rising, and we are working really hard to get information to the American public," Walensky said. The US health authorities have said the Omicron is more transmissible than the previous coronavirus variants and comprises the 95% of cases in the United States, but the cases are mild and have so far not resulted in deaths.

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US Ready to Propose Scaling Back Troops, Drills in Europe in Talks With Russia - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is prepared to offer scaling back the number of US troops and military drills conducted in Eastern Europe if Russia agrees to reduce its military activity near Ukraine's border, NBC reported on Friday citing current and former US officials.

The United States is compiling a list of options for force posture changes in Europe that will be discussed with Russia at next week's bilateral security talks, the report said.

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Blinken, Ukraine's Kuleba Discuss Potential Responses to Russia's Buildup - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON. January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba discussed potential responses by the United States to Russia's buildup near the border with Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday. "Secretary Blinken reaffirmed the United States' unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression. He discussed potential US and Allied responses to Russia's military buildup along Ukraine's borders and upcoming diplomatic engagements with Russia," Price said in a statement. Blinken emphasized there will be "no conversations about Ukraine without Ukraine," Price added.

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NATO Foreign Ministers Emphasize Need for Dialogue on Russia Buildup - US Mission

WASHINGTON. January 7 (Sputnik) - The NATO member states' foreign ministers emphasized during an extraordinary session the need for diplomacy, dialogue and de-escalation of tensions regarding Russia's buildup of troops near the border with Ukraine, the US mission to the alliance said on Friday.

"Ahead of the forthcoming NATO - Russia Council, they underlined the need for diplomacy, dialogue and de-escalation," the US mission said in a statement.

Foreign Ministers of all NATO ally countries reaffirmed their unity in response to Russian behavior towards Ukraine, it added.

Tensions between Russia and Ukraine have increased in the past several weeks amid an alleged Russian troops buildup at the Ukrainian border and claims of preparations for an invasion. Russia has repeatedly denied the accusations, saying it has the right to relocate troops within its sovereign territory and at its own discretion, while making it clear that NATO's military activity near Russian borders poses a threat to its security.

On December 17, Russia released proposals on security guarantees to NATO and the United States that seek to prevent the alliance's further expansion eastward and ban the deployment of US and Russian intermediate and short-range missiles within reach of each other's territory, among other items.

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Commerce Secretary Raises Worry About Status for US Businesses in Turkey - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo met with Turkish Trade Minister Mehmet Mus to reaffirm the commitment to deepen US-Turkey relations and increase bilateral trade, but expressed concern about operating conditions for US businesses amid soaring inflation in Turkey, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

"During the meeting, Secretary Raimondo raised concerns about recent actions of the Turkish government that have undermined the security and predictability of the business environment for US companies and foreign investors," the Commerce Department said in a statement. Inflation in Turkey has hit 19-year highs and the Lira has lost more than 20% of its value over the past week after a series of interest rate cuts.

Raimondo and Mus also discussed recent examples of successful bilateral cooperation in the energy and digital sectors and agreed for the cooperation in these sectors to continue, the statement said.

The two officials pledged to overcome challenges and identify new opportunities for advancing mutual clean energy and digital economy goals for the Middle East region, the statement added.

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US Govt. Closes Offices Amid Snowfall, Power Outages in Washington Metropolitan Area

WASHINGTON. January 7 (Sputnik) - The US federal government on Friday closed its offices amid the snowfall in the Washington, DC metropolitan area that has left thousands of people without power.

"The federal offices in the Washington, DC area are closed," the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM) said in a notice.

The OPM said because of the closure, government employees are working remotely.

The snowfall continued during the night and caused some 60,000 power outages in the state of Virginia, according to poweroutages.us. Almost 1,000 residents in the neighboring state of Maryland are without electricity. The US capital is sandwiched between the two states.

The three major airports serving Washington, DC reported more than 400 flight cancellations and delays. Almost half were reported at the Ronald Reagan National airport located inside the city, according to flightware.com. The Baltimore-Washington International Airport and the Dulles International Airport experienced about 100 cancellations and delays.

The Washington, DC transportation authorities announced that bus services in the city will be available on a moderate snow service plan.

"Service on some routes is suspended and detours will be in effect on certain routes to avoid areas prone to hazardous conditions such as hilly terrain and narrow streets. Approximately 119 out of 183 routes will operate," the authorities said in a statement.

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US Creates New Special Operations Command Headquarters in Albania - European Command
WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US armed forces have created a new forward coordinating headquarters in Albania in southeastern Europe, the European Command (EUCOM) announced in an official report on Friday.

"As part of an ongoing effort in enhancing Special Operations Forces capabilities as a keystone for regional stability, US Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) has made the decision to locate a forward-based SOF headquarters, on a rotational basis, in Albania," the report said.

EUCOM explained in the report that the location of the forward headquarters in Albania will provide increased interoperability with US Albanian allies, important access to transportation hubs in the Balkans and greater logistical flexibility.

"The ability to rapidly move and train within the Balkans, in close coordination with other allied and partner forces, made Albania the best location for this effort," Special Operations Command Europe Commander Maj. Gen. David Tabor said in the report.

Albania remained a strong NATO ally and the United States enjoyed a strong relationship with the Albanian government and Ministry of Defense, which made the placement of a forward headquarters there a natural fit and it would increase the flexibility of both special operations and conventional forces in the region, the report said.

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US Diplomat Sherman, OSCE Secretary General Discuss Ukraine, Russia – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and with the OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmidt in a phone call agreed to seek diplomatic ways for de-escalation during the upcoming council meeting next week amid ongoing tensions between Russian and Ukraine, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman spoke today with OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid to discuss their shared concern about Russia's military build-up along Ukraine's borders," Price said in a press release. "They agreed that the OSCE Permanent Council meeting next week will be an opportunity to call for de-escalation and diplomacy as well as discuss approaches to reduce regional tensions. The OSCE is a forum where all participating States have an equal voice."

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US Cuts Interval for Booster Shot to 5 Months for Adults Receiving Moderna COVID Vaccines

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Friday that it has shortened the waiting interval between receiving the initial COVID-19 vaccine doses produced by Moderna and getting a booster shot from six months to five in American adults aged 18 years and older.

"Today, the US Food and Drug Administration amended the emergency use authorization (EUA) for the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine to shorten the time between the completion of a primary series of the vaccine and a booster dose to at least five months for individuals 18 years of age and older," FDA said in a press release.

On Thursday, the US Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted to recommend shortening the interval between primary series of vaccination against the coronavirus and the Pfizer booster shot from six to five months in adolescents who are 12-17 years old.

At present, only the Pfizer-BioNTech booster vaccine is authorized and recommended for use in adolescents 12-17 years old.

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US State of Georgia Joins \$26Bln Opioid Settlement With J&J, Pharmaceutical Distributors

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The US state of Georgia announced in a statement on Friday that it has signed on to the \$26 billion multi-state settlement with opioid producer Johnson & Johnson, as well as with the pharmaceutical distributors Cardinal, McKesson and AmerisourceBergen.

"Attorney General Chris Carr today announced that the state of Georgia has signed on to the \$26 billion multi-state agreement with Cardinal, McKesson and AmerisourceBergen - the nation's three major pharmaceutical distributors - and opioid manufacturer and marketer Johnson & Johnson," the statement said.

Carr said the authorities are dedicated to holding those accountable who have played a critical role in contributing to the ongoing opioid epidemic in the United States.

"Today's announcement is the result of our tireless efforts to achieve the best possible outcome for our state and fellow citizens. This includes working with our litigating local governments so that our state is positioned to maximize its recovery under this settlement. We are confident that joining the settlement at this time will prove beneficial to our state, our citizens and our communities, as we continue our fight to end this epidemic and address the widespread damage it has caused," Carr said.

Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate there were an estimated 100,306 drug overdose deaths in the United States during 12-month period ending in

April 2021, an increase of 28.5% from the 78,056 deaths during the same period the year before.

Many of the victims either overdosed on prescription opioids or initially became addicted to prescribed painkillers and later switched to deadly black-market alternatives such as heroin.